DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 269 837 EA 018 318

AUTHOR DuFour, Richard P.
TITLE Effective Business Practices Can Be Applied to Schools.
PUB DATE Feb 86
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Association of Secondary School Principals (70th, Orlando, FL, February 14-18, 1986).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Administrative Principles; Administrator Role; Elementary Secondary Education; Organizational Effectiveness; Productivity; School Administration; School Effectiveness
IDENTIFIERS Lake County Public Schools IL

ABSTRACT

Despite the claims of conventional wisdom, business and education can learn from each other. An examination of "In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Companies," by Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman, reveals several ideas and practices that schools can use effectively. (1) A bias for action: hold daily administrative team meetings and replace standing committees with task forces. (2) Stick close to the customer: conduct intensive, ongoing, followup studies of graduates to test educational relevance. (3) Autonomy and entrepreneurship: seek out and encourage those who will champion innovations. (4) Productivity through people: provide teachers with comparative feedback on their performance and celebrate their successes. (5) Hands-on management: building level administrators should keep a hand in teaching and maintain high visibility. (6) Stick to the basics: monitor the achievement of student course objectives closely. (7) Keep the organizational structure simple: give individual schools a large measure of autonomy. (8) Simultaneous looseness and tightness: while allowing initiative and autonomy, insist on the observance of certain core values. (PGD)

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EFFECTIVE BUSINESS PRACTICES CAN BE APPLIED TO SCHOOLS

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Richard P. DuFour, Principal
Adlai E. Stevenson High School
Prairie View, Illinois

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EFFECTIVE BUSINESS PRACTICES CAN BE APPLIED TO SCHOOLS

How many times have you heard it expressed- the notion that an approach, a practice or a behavior that is encouraged or tolerated in education would never survive in the "real world" of business and industry. Indeed, conventional wisdom seems to hold that the worlds of education and business are so separate, so dissimilar, that experiences in one are of no value or relevance to the other. This article both rejects that conventional wisdom and holds that business and education can learn much from each other. Certainly the business world has looked to and benefited from the expertise of educators in establishing company training programs. Just as certainly, educators can gain much from examining the philosophy and policies of successful businesses. Acting upon this basic premise, the entire administrative team of Adlai E. Stevenson High School, District 125 (Lake County, Illinois) carefully examined In Search of Excellence: Lessons from America's Best Run Companies by Thomas Peters and Robert Waterman for ideas and practices that could be incorporated into the district. We found that many of these ideas and practices made a smooth transition from business to education. Listed below are the characteristics of excellent companies identified in In Search of Excellence, a brief excerpt from Peters and Waterman explaining that concept, and specific recommendations for schools based on our efforts to apply these concepts to Stevenson High School.

1) A Bias For Action, For Getting Things Done

   Peters and Waterman (P and W): "Excellent companies get quick action because their organizations are fluid. These companies

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are characterized by a vast network of informal, open communications... the right people get into contact with each other regularly. ... (There is) a virtual technology of keeping in touch."

A) Hold daily meetings of the administrative team.

The administrative team (made up of a principal and six directors of instruction or department chairmen) had traditionally met one afternoon each week to consider the items presented on a formal agenda. While continuing this tradition, we initiated an informal meeting over coffee at the start of each school day. No formal agenda was provided for these brief (twenty minute) meetings, and thus we were able to use this time for a free-flowing exchange of ideas, concerns and information. The benefits of this daily meeting soon became apparent. We had reached the size at which Directors might not see each other or the Principal at any time other than the weekly meeting. As a result, minor problems or concerns were allowed to fester and accumulate, and the weekly meetings were deteriorating to "gripe sessions." The daily meetings provided an opportunity to resolve these concerns and reserve the weekly meeting for more substantive issues. More importantly, the informal daily contact helped to build a sense of "team," of united purpose and effort. All of us agreed that the team had never functioned more effectively or more smoothly as a result of those meetings.

B) Replace standing committees with task forces.

Long-standing committees have a tendency to procrastinate- they

can always delay a decision until the next meeting. We replaced these committees with task forces that were given a specific charge and a specified, limited amount of time (usually about a month) in which to complete their work. Membership of the task forces was limited to ten or fewer people who would meet frequently during the brief life of the task force and would present a succinct statement of recommendations as their final act. In the past two years these task forces have presented recommendations regarding the goals of the school, graduation requirements, professional growth requirements for the staff, and encouragement of student participation in co-curricular activities. All of these recommendations have been approved by the Board.

2) Stick Close To The Customer

P and W: Excellent companies learn from the people they serve. They are good listeners and get many of their best ideas from their customers.

-Conduct intensive, on-going follow-up studies.

If schools bother with any form of follow-up of their graduates, they typically rely on mailings and settle for the smattering of responses they receive. The inevitable low rate of return and the self-selection of the respondents calls the validity of the results into question, and thus there is a tendency to dismiss those results. We developed an extensive follow-up questionnaire by asking each department to identify what information it would like to have from our graduates. Next we used a random numbers table to select fifteen percent of a graduating class. Finally, a secretary was given the responsibility of

"tracking down" these graduates, contacting them by phone, reading questions to them, and tabulating their responses. The random selection of these students and the efforts made to elicit a response from each enables us to conclude that the results are significant. Furthermore, since an individual's view of his or her education may vary with time, we will conduct this study the first, fifth and tenth years following graduation to give us a longitudinal look at how our customers regard the job we have done.

3) Autonomy and Entrepreneurship

P and W: The innovative companies foster many leaders and many innovators throughout the organization. A project is not begun unless an individual zealot or "champion" volunteers to embrace that project, to become personally committed to its success.

-Seek out and encourage champions before attempting to implement an idea.

Conventional wisdom has encouraged administrators to seek faculty approval (or at least acquiescence) for most ideas before attempting to put those ideas into action. The recommendation presented here is a significant deviation from that wisdom. Schools should not attempt to put an idea into action unless a champion is willing to take responsibility for its ultimate success. An example illustrates the point. This year some of our teachers of basic or remedial students bemoaned the fact that they had little opportunity to converse with one another. We invited their suggestions. One of the teachers responded by convincing those teaching freshmen and sophomores to request

released time once or twice each quarter to pursue topics of their choosing. At the first meeting of this Basic Council the group identified those topics, and she proceeded to plan each meeting, contact speakers, and keep her colleagues informed of her progress. The meetings were wonderfully diverse. A psychologist from a nearby hospital instructed the Basic Council as to how its members might form a support group. Several meetings were devoted to developing common expectations regarding student behavior, homework requirements, formats for reports, etc. A reading specialist instructed her colleagues in reading in the content areas. Interdisciplinary units and common field trips were developed. Every participant was unabashedly enthusiastic about the Basic Council. In fact, when they became concerned that the released time for their meetings was interferring with their classroom responsibilities, they began to hold meetings after school rather than abandon or curtail them. By the end of the year teachers of our most capable students had proposed the establishment of an Honors Council, and other faculty members were considering how various small groups might be formed to pursue a common interest. Those who have readily identifiable champions are likely to receive administrative support; those without champions will not.

4) Productivity Through People

P and W: Excellent companies realize that a prime factor in motivation is the individual's self-perception that he or she is, in fact, doing well. Thus, these companies set their goals to insure that most people will achieve them, provide information on comparative performance, and celebrate success with ceremony and hoopla.

A) Provide teachers with comparative feedback on their performance. This spring we interviewed a teacher with sixteen years experience for a position in our science department. During the course of our conversation he acknowledged that he had never had the benefit of an external indicator of student achievement. He had absolutely no idea as to how the performance of his students compared to students in the nation, the state, the next town, or the next classroom. Small wonder he felt a sense of malaise after operating in a vacuum for his entire professional life. We constantly seek to provide our teachers with comparative information as to the performance of their students. Like many schools we use standardized achievement tests and analyze student performance on ACT and SAT exams. We also administer subject-specific, nationally normed, criterion referenced tests in many of our courses to enable us to compare the performance of our students with national averages. Most importantly, we require common semester examinations for all courses taught by two or more teachers. These criterion referenced exams, developed by the teachers, are designed to assess student attainment of the objectives of the course. A computer program enables us to analyze student performance in as many as fifteen different subtests within each exam. Teachers are provided with the average of their students and the average of the total group for each subtest as well as for the exam. Thus, teachers are able to identify areas in which their students performed significantly above or below the norm for the school. Faculty members are then encouraged to discuss materials, strategies,

pacing, etc. for their problem areas with their colleagues who teach the course.

Although teachers are quite likely to regard a proposal for this type of test analysis with suspicion, administrators can convince them over time that the purpose of this testing is to help them improve their instruction and thus student performance.

B) Celebrate the success of your teachers.

We use the data we collect in our assessment of student achievement to celebrate the success of our teachers and students. Daily announcements, sign boards, press releases, and newsletters trumpet the news when our students surpass state and local norms on an exam, perform well in academic competition, or earn academic distinction. We also attempt to enhance the self-esteem of our faculty by encouraging them to play an active role in their professional organizations. In fact, the Board of Education has set aside funds to pay the expenses of any teacher who makes a presentation at a state, regional, or national meeting. In short, we aggressively seek out every opportunity to publicize and reinforce the accomplishments of the faculty.

5) Hands-On/Value Driven

P and W: Top management in excellent companies stays close to the action- walking plant floors, visiting stores, etc. These leaders believe in "management by walking about" (MBWA).

A) Building level administrators should keep a hand in teaching.

The essential purpose of a school is to teach. Therefore, all directors teach one class. The principal teaches one three-week unit each quarter while the regularly assigned teacher works on a curriculum project. The superintendent serves as a

substitute teacher on a regular basis.

B) The principal and department chairmen should be highly visible in the school.

The principal and directors schedule a specific time each day that they roam the halls and seek out teachers and students for informal exchanges.

6) Stick to the Knitting

P and W: Excellent companies stick to the basics rather than seeking to diversify their goals or tasks.

-Closely monitor the achievement of student objectives by course.

Too often schools attempt to do too much. In accepting every goal thrust their way they seem to say to their teachers that "everything is important, pay attention to everything." As a result teachers are left to their own devices with no clear direction. We have attempted to provide that direction by mapping our curriculum. Each course has specific student objectives or outcomes that reflect the limited goals of the department and school. Departmental exams provide one means of monitoring student achievement of those objectives.

7) Simple Form, Lean Staff

P and W: The structure of effective organizations is elegantly simple. Top level staffs are lean.

-Give individual schools large measures of autonomy.

This was never a problem at Stevenson since the high school represents the only school in the district. However, the findings of both Peters and Waterman and the effective schools research suggest that school improvement plans should be generated and executed at the building level.

8) Simultaneous Loose Tight Properties

P and W: At the same time that excellent organizations encourage individual initiative and autonomy (i.e. looseness), they demand rigid adherence (i.e. tightness) to a few core values that drive and give direction to everyone in the organization.

-Identify the core values of your school and insist that they be observed in the day-to-day operation of the school

Every organization must contend with the problem of balancing two significant but somewhat contradictory goals. On the one hand, effective organizations encourage autonomy and innovativeness on the part of their employees since doing so leads to greater productivity and higher morale. On the other hand, organizations must have a focus, a clearly understood set of values that binds the autonomous individuals together in the pursuit of a common goal. We began our effort to identify those values for Stevenson by asking the question, "What are the characteristics of an excellent school?" A task force polled faculty, parents, students, and community members and gradually was able to develop a composite description of the school those groups sought. From that description we were able to identify the values that succinctly state our expectations for teachers, students, parents, and administrators. For example, although teachers are encouraged to be innovative in the classroom on a day-to-day basis, they are also expected to adhere to the five values listed below:

1) We will teach to the course objectives and provide evidence of student achievement of those objectives.

2) We will make full use of the instructional time allotted to us.

3) We will demonstrate our expectation that each student is able to achieve the basic objectives of the course.

4) We will help to ensure an orderly atmosphere that is conducive to learning throughout the building.

5) We will treat all members of the school community with respect and consideration.

In short, Stevenson High School has demonstrated that a school system can successfully apply the principles and practices that have characterized the nation's most successful businesses. School administrators overlook a wealth of information if they incorrectly assume that the world of business is of no relevance to them.